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Critical Responses to Texts: Reading Attitudes of University Students in Indonesian Learning Context

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Abstract

This study discusses university students' reading attitudes and perspectives on reading texts. Reading attitude was measured through students' critical responses in comprehending and evaluating the content of the texts. This descriptive-quantitative study employed a survey. It was conducted in Indonesian Language Teaching Study Program in State University of Makassar, Indonesia. The data were collected through a questionnaire and interviews. The results of this study indicated that the students' critical responses to texts were categorized as low. In general, the students obtained only the stated information found in texts, and they made very little attempt to seek for implied meanings. They rarely tried to connect one text to another and to social as well as cultural contexts of the texts. These poor critical responses of the students have resulted from the process of learning to read which has been more text-oriented in nature rather than ideology-concerns of the texts.

Keywords: learning to read, critical responses, reading attitude

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1. Introduction

In the context of learning to read, the development of the critical awareness is perceived as an effort to build an understanding that the texts presented to the readers are the texts which cannot be separated from the authority and ideology practice. Readers must realize that the texts were produced for the hegemonic and domination purpose. In [1] asserts that a critical study on language will examine a hidden agenda inside every choice of language so that readers must be critical, analytical, and curious about why the writer uses the language. A critical study on language is based on the critical theories which carry the emancipatory and empowering objectives.

The interaction between readers and texts can be categorized into two perspectives, that are psychological perspective and social-process perspective [1, 3, 8, 15]. The psychological perspective sees the reading activity as a cognitive process while the social-process perspective perceives the reading activity as a reader-text interaction. From the social perspective, the meaning of the text is constructed and negotiated by the readers. Social contexts, social episodes and social experiences play an important

role in the process of making the texts meaningful. Reading within social-process perspective can develop the critical reading skills in relation to the ideology and authority practice. Readers can reflect, relate, and question ideologies delivered by the writer.

The critical attitude possessed by readers is very crucial in responding to the texts. Ideal readers are able to be analytical towards every text. They do not only receive the information as it is, but they become inquisitive towards assumptions and reasons underlying the information. However, [14] identifies readers' weakness in reading that is to be obedient towards the content of their reading materials. In addition, Wallace underlines three key points around the issue: (1) readers have become submissive towards the texts, (2) readers are easily influenced by the texts, (3) readers can be against the propositional messages delivered through the texts, but they become hopeless when it comes to the text's ideologies.

The ideal readers use critical thinking skills to evaluate and reflect the information found in texts. The importance of these skills rests on the nature of the texts that is not neutral. In [12] characterizes possible characteristics of texts as follows: (1) texts are produced to represent a particular notion or point of view, (2) texts do not possess a single meaning, (3) texts carry out one particular perspective and ignore the other, and (4) texts make the perspective accepted as truth. The characteristics born in texts require readers to evaluate and reflect every information found in the texts. The readers should treat every message as a perspective that needs to be justified.

A study conducted by [16] has revealed that most of university students have not fulfilled the requirements to be a critical reader, including how to determine the author's purpose to write a text. Findings of the study confirmed that the students were not able to analyze and draw a conclusion from texts given so it is not possible to expect them to be critical towards the texts. Another study by [9] showed that a group of perspective primary school teachers candidates admitted that they did not belong to the critical readers' group and did not have an ability to read analytically.

This study, therefore, aimed at describing university students' critical responses to the activity of reading. It was oriented to measure the students' responses to reading various texts, including texts which carry out ideologies. The results of this study on students' critical attitude towards reading would be a reference to develop strategies to teach the students how to read.

2. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. This study was an initial part of a research and development study which was conducted in a university. It aimed to describe the students' reading behavior, namely critical responses to texts. The participants of this study were 144 students who were in the second and fourth

No	Items	University Students' Reading Behavior (%)			
		Always	**Often**	**Seldom**	**Never**
1	Identify the author's purpose to write the text	0,69	44.44	37,50	17,36
2	Rely on the information found in the text	5,56	47,92	44,44	2,08
3	Identify parties benefited/disadvantaged in the text	12,50	41,67	33,33	12,50
4	Relate the text with the context	4,17	34,03	48,61	13,19
5	Question the author's background in relation to the text	9,72	47,92	32,64	9,72
6	Try to understand the text matters from different perspectives/point of views	8,22	45,14	40,97	5,56
7	Compare the text being read with another text from different source	9,03	45,14	40,28	5,56
8	Identify the possible emergence of discriminative/dominative acts towards certain groups of people	9,03	45,14	40,28	5,56
9	Bring forward textual understanding instead of ideologies interpretation	11,82	54,17	29,86	4,17
10	Believe that the text was written to fulfill a certain objective (s)	27,08	36,11	23,61	13,19

TABLE 1: University Students' Reading Behaviors.

semester and two lecturers whose subject to teach was reading at the Indonesian Language Teaching Study Program of State University of Makassar.

The data were collected through a questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire was used to obtain data regarding the students' reading behavior. It used the Likert-scale which provided four alternatives to answers. The questions were related to students' critical response to texts. The interviews were conducted to collect the lecturers' responses regarding the learning process in the classroom. Qualitative data analysis was employed through some stages: data administration, data analysis, and data interpretation. The responses were treated by grouping, coding, and scaling. The data were represented in terms of percentage and interpreted using some related theories and previous research findings.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Findings

The results of the study showed that the students' critical responses to texts were categorized low. Most of the students had not performed the critical responses to texts. Table 1 below presents the findings.

Table 1 shows that students who never and seldom identified the author's purpose outnumbered those who always and often identified the purpose. The table also shows that students had a tendency to rely on the information provided by the author in the text. The students provided good critical responses in identifying parties benefited/disadvantaged in the text. However, the percentage of the students who seldom or never identified the parties was bigger than those who always did it.

There was a large number of students who did not relate the text with the context. The interpretation was that the students only focused on the textual features and ignored the context which surrounded the text. The students were categorized good at identifying the author's background, but the percentage of the students who seldom or never identified the author's background was still high.

There were many students attempted to understand the text from different perspectives compared to those who did not, but the percentage was not much different. Most of the students were trying to compare the text with another text from another source, but the others did not do it.

There were half of the students who seldom or never identified parties which experienced discriminative/dominative acts. In general, the students' priority was to understand textual features rather than ideologies carried out by the text. In addition, the students did not believe that the text was written for a specific purpose.

3.2. Discussion

The findings have revealed that the students' critical reading skills were not yet developed. Most of the students did not perform good reading behaviors. The students had not provided critical responses to texts. The weaknesses underlying these reading behaviors according to [14] are that readers (1) do not attempt to identify the author's purpose to write the text, (2) rely much on the information provided in the text by the author, (3) do not relate the text with the context and another relevant text, (4) do not let the content of the text justified from different perspectives, and (5) prioritize textual features rather than ideologies carried out by the text.

Those weaknesses may lead the students into a state in which they get easily tricked or deceived. They are put under the control of the author as well as the text. They are dominated and are forced to comply the information and objectives projected through text by the author. In fact, the texts exist to fulfill a particular objective, to represent a certain point of view [12, 14].

The low critical responses are in line with the learning process experienced by the students in the classroom. The interviews done with two reading lecturers revealed that the reading activity developed was focused more on the structure and the use of language in a text while the ability to analyze and evaluate messages delivered by the

text received less attention. The students are rarely exposed to newspapers, advertisement, and editorials as reading materials in the classroom. This learning process was identified as the main source of poor critical responses provided by the students. This finding is in line with [6] who asserts that language learning which makes language structure the center of learning will not support learners to think critically.

The findings on students' low critical responses have indicated that the process of learning to read at the university level needs to be improved. Language learning should not only be oriented to communicative purpose but also to students' critical awareness. According to [14], language learning which is only focused on language skills but not the critical components is regarded as an irresponsible learning.

The importance of developing the students' critical awareness results from the emergence of texts which contain ideologies and the authority practice. Many texts published in the mass media are intentionally produced for a particular purpose, such as to persuade, to create and image, to campaign, or to impose an ideology. As a result, university students need to be able to provide critical responses to the texts. Their success in life is determined by their critical awareness. Learning process at the university should be able to prepare the students to be critical and later become an effective citizen. The lecturers need to give guidance of how to be a critical reader to their students [14].

The low critical responses provided by the students in this study were caused by their low critical awareness. To increase the students' critical responses to texts, it is recommended to use the critical literacy approach to their learning. This approach can improve the students' critical understanding of texts in terms of authority. It develops readers' critical behaviors through the attempt to question every text [4].

In [7] through her study proved that the critical literacy approach to English language learning in Indonesia could improve learners' critical awareness, motivation, and language skills. The improvement of the critical awareness was marked by the improvement of learners' ability to question matters and assumptions found within a text, learners' enthusiasm and interests in learning. If learners are able to use complex sentences in their writing, it means that their language skills have improved. This critical literacy approach can be utilized by the lecturers to teach their students how to provide critical responses to texts.

The critical literacy approach can help students develop their ability to respond critically to texts. The students will be able to examine issues found in the texts from different perspectives, justify assumptions, and investigate the writer's purpose to write the texts. In [2] categorized the critical literacy approach into three, that are: (1) learning with ideologies as the background to engage students to a discussion on text and its context; (2) learning through reflection to help students to evaluate a text and relate it with their background knowledge; and (3) learning to criticize a text to reveal one particular point of view. The critical literacy approach develops students'

critical attitude through evaluating texts. The characteristics of this approach are: (1) focus on the issue of authority to develop the ability to reflect and transform thoughts; (2) evaluate problems from various perspectives, (3) propose/conduct an alternative reaction [10, 11].

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings, it was found that university students provided low critical responses towards texts being read. In general, they rely much on the information provided in a text and they did not try to understand what was beyond the text. They rarely related the text with another text and also the social context. The students did not perform good reading behaviors in evaluating the writer's purposes. They only focused on the textual features and tended to ignore the ideologies carried out by the text.

This low critical responses resulted from the learning process which was oriented to the textual aspects rather that the ideological aspects. The activities of reading were still limited to only evaluate language components of the text, not to look over ideology contained in the text. To improve the students' ability to provide critical responses to texts, it is recommended to make use the critical literacy approach to learning language at the university level. This approach particularly helps increase the students' critical responses towards texts.

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